

Churchill
by John Neville
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On May 19, 2008 we caught the train from Thompson Manitoba, overnight to Churchill, on Hudson Bay. For two weeks I had been recording bird songs as we travelled north through the Central Boreal Forest. I had dreamed of this opportunity for a long time. Churchill is a birding hotspot in what is technically known as the subarctic. A thin strip of tundra separates the marine ecosystem from the northern edge of the boreal forest. This means that birds from three different ecosystems are in close proximity.

There is no road access to Churchill so train and plane starting from Winnipeg are the usual forms of transport. Sitting comfortably in the dining car, there was a definite feeling of romance as the pristine boreal forest passed by our window. More and more bogs and fens, lakes and rivers divided the Spruce, Tamarack, Birch and Willows. The train's speed gradually diminished overnight as we approached our destination. The reason was the heaving by the permafrost under the rails. When we arrived we were greeted by a carpet of snow and solid ice on the Churchill River and Hudson Bay. The stunted trees (Taiga) at the northern edge of the forest are called "the land of little sticks" by the Chipewyan.

On our journey north, Snow Geese frequently flew overhead, some above the clouds. They became my first recording opportunity as they arrived in hundreds, and assembled into thousands. Many of them were staging near the river before moving to the high Arctic, while others waited for the snow to melt on the tundra of La Perouse Bay. After a week I had recorded a variety of species, including: Lesser Yellowlegs, Three-toed Woodpecker, Pine Grosbeak, lovely close-ups of Willow Ptarmigan, Harris' Sparrow, Common Redpoll etc. Although it was still cold enough for three or four layers of clothes at 3AM, the daytime temperatures were quickly increasing towards the end of May. The snow was disappearing on a daily basis, and leads of open water were appearing in the river and bay. One such stretch of open water in the river was occupied by four pairs of Black Scoter. They would line up and diver in unison. When they reappeared on the surface they produced gentle piping contact calls and the males a high mellow whistled note. The European Common Scoter is one of two subspecies of the Black Scoter. Two or three dives would take them to the downstream edge of the lead when they would fly back to repeat the process. The birds feed on crustaceans, mollusks, insects and weed. This open water was only a few meters from the shore and allowed a great recording opportunity for a bird that is not often captured in a microphone.

The snow quickly melted off the tundra at the beginning of June sometimes producing small creeks across the gravel roads. As the road to Twin Lakes opened up we travelled more and more to that area of tundra, forest and wetlands. One special area known as the fen had Whimbrel, Short-billed Dowitcher, American Golden Plover and Hudsonian Godwit. I was able to record all four species although it was sometimes difficult learning the new sounds. Some of the courtship and display songs were quite new and I am not aware of any recordings of these particular activities. Another complication was the variety of sounds made by the Lesser Yellowlegs. In nearby lakes Pacific Loon, Tundra Swan and Sandhill Crane could always be heard early in the morning.

We stayed at the Northern Studies Center with a variety of professors and graduate students covering Earth Sciences and Avian Topics. We learned lots from them and shared a little of our own experiences

where appropriate. The center used to be a rocket launching site and still has a few disarmed missiles and three rocket launching pads. One day staff from a rehab center arrived and released four Snowy Owls appropriately from a launching pad. As the bay ice began to break up in early June, more and more shorebirds began to show up on a daily basis. Semipalmated Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Ruddy Turnstone and Lapland Longspur all became recordable. Standing on a gravel beach one day amongst large piles of kelp, mussel shells and wood from trees and old ships, I was aggressively bombed by Common Raven!. They were nesting close by on top of some metal cages. The cages are sometimes used for badly behaved Polar Bears who spend too much time around the community.

Cape Merry was another memorable site for recording. It is the eastern boundary of the river and looks across the estuary to Fort Prince of Wales. Each location still has 18th century canons and impressive stone fortifications. The rocks on the cape have been smoothed by glacial activity producing close to a paved finish. I sat out at the end one day and recorded Common Eider and Long-tailed Duck. Four male Eider were aggressively courting one desirable female. They circled around her and threw their heads back to call while displaying. On June 4th hundreds of Arctic Tern arrived at the grainery ponds and elsewhere. One day after arriving, they were already into courtship mode and all but ignored me recording them at close quarters. It was really impressive to witness the Terns taking full advantage of the short summer after such a long migration!

Wood and Boreal Chorus Frogs became easy to record by the middle of June and sometimes were too noisy when trying to record other critters. There were still a few Caribou on the tundra but I never got close enough to record their “clicking” heels. We had no encounters with Polar Bears but Heather always stayed nearby with the car in case of a chance meeting. All the student groups from the Studies Center had a lookout with a gun when working out on the tundra. We also failed to see the Beluga Whales which were just returning in late June. About three thousand of them show up in the Churchill River by early July. At that time, trips are available across the estuary to Fort Prince of Whales and hydrophones are available to listen to the whales.

I recorded forty-five species on the Churchill peninsula and it was definitely a dream come true.